DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 588 CS 507 907

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TITLE Handling News Media: Johnson and Dorman's Bag of Tricks.
PUB DATE 9 Aug 92
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform (12th, Rhonert Park, CA, August 9-12, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Role; Media Research; *News Media; *Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS Frame Analysis Theory; *Media Literacy

ABSTRACT

What passes for considered judgment in public discourse today is often little more than "unearned opinion"--the received opinion offered by others who have the power to shape the news. So students must develop consistent intellectual standards for routinely evaluating the news media which so frequently provide the empirical stuff about which they reason. A general education course on Critical Thinking and the Mass Media is based on a theoretical framework which enables teachers and students to make coherent sense of the news. First, the course demonstrates the media's power of representation and makes the point that media "manufacture" meaning, rather than simply serving as a neutral conveyor belt for information. Frame analysis, or the way in which a news event is represented, is emphasized in the course via ongoing activities. A semester-long project, carried out in groups, and involving a focus on a single contemporary issue, makes frame analysis a daily concern and demands that students find information on social issues about which they may already have formed strong opinions, but not on the basis of independent inquiry. The structure of the media industry deserves attention early in the semester, so students can understand how news has increasingly become a commodity produced for profit. Simple content analyses of major news industry publications, or of alternative mass media (sometimes in periodicals of opposed viewpoints), also can prove valuable. By developing a theoretical model, teachers can teach a characteristic mode of inquiry to students, the aim of which is not simply critical awareness and understanding, but critical autonomy. (HB)

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"Handling News Media: Johnson and Dorman's Bag of Tricks"

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Sunday, August 9, 1992

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CS507307

Twelfth Annual International Conference for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique
Sonoma State University

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Presentation by William A. Dorman

As I'm certain most of you are aware, last Sunday marked the second anniversary of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. In terms of this afternoon's workshop, I suppose what struck me most about the confrontation in the Gulf was how in a very short period of time so many people became persuaded that it was worth giving up their lives (or at least it was worth *others* giving up their lives) for the future of an undemocratic country whose very existence they had been blissfully unaware only weeks previously.

My point here is **not** that the war was wrong--or right, for that matter. Rather, it is simply to remind you that it is safe to say that the great majority of Americans before August 2, 1990, would have been hard pressed to tell the difference between Saddam Hussein and a Melanesian fire dancer, if such exist. Yet within days of the invasion, my neighbors, my friends, and most important of all, my students, were speaking with great authority and little doubt about the nature of the conflict, the issues involved, and the options available. And all of this, so far as I could tell, without having checking out so much as a single book on the Middle East from the library, let alone enrolling in an academic course dealing with the region.

How could this be? The answer, of course, is massive press coverage; the Persian Gulf conflict was the most thoroughly covered news event since the Vietnam war. Certainly, the case of the press and the Gulf offers the best evidence I know that we live in an age of "instant knowledge," and I for one do not find that reassuring. It seems to me that what passes for considered judgment in public discourse today is often little more than ***unearned opinion***. I would even go so far as to say that we are caught in what might fairly be described as a wave of intellectual burglary; that is to say, too often what people argue is not the result of their own reasoning or analysis. Rather, all too frequently we are merely taking as our own the received opinion offered by others who have the power to shape the news.

Be that as it may, I think a workshop such as this one has everything to do with the theme of this year's conference, which is Cultivating the Reasoning Mind.

Reasoning, after all, does not take place in a vacuum. It requires **something** to reason about--and that is where the news media come in. Much of what our students think about--and the ways in which they think about it--are the product of the news media. Therefore it seems essential to me that we concern ourselves with helping our students to develop consistent intellectual standards for routinely evaluating the news media which so frequently provide the ***empirical stuff*** about which they reason.

Let me begin by making clear two assumptions behind my teaching about the news media.

My central assumption, which I borrow from a British classroom teacher, is that the purpose of education. should be to turn out ***misfits***--not spare parts for society. Please understand that by misfits I do not take him to mean ***outlaws***. Rather, I think he is calling first and foremost for critical thinkers.

Second, I think that teaching about the news media remains fairly marginal at all levels. By this I mean that I agree with Len Masterman when he says that "At present our schools largely continue to produce students who are likely to carry with them for the rest of their lives either a quite unwarranted faith in the integrity of media images and representations, or an equally dangerous undifferentiated skepticism which sees the media as sources of all evil." It seems to me that neither view is particularly useful to the critical thinker, let alone accurate.

Indeed, there is nothing more important to think carefully about than the news media. Consider what other force in the lives of your students is more pervasive, more penetrating. For example, In some ways media provide the very mother's milk of political consciousness. How many of your students have formed opinions of Bill Clinton's love life independent of the press? Or of Ross Perot's persona? Or of Dan Quayle's ability to spell, let alone engage in serious thought?

Yet our students are usually so familiar with media, so immersed in them, that they find the news-as-process to be commonplace, quite literally unremarkable, and therefore they tend to pay no more close attention to its qualities and impact on their lives than they do to the act of breathing. As a teacher, I aim to encourage my students to incorporate media awareness into their daily intellectual lives and to develop a systematic way of thinking critically about news and how it is produced.

My purpose this afternoon is to share a theoretical framework which can enable teachers and students to make coherent sense of the news, and to suggest some core concepts and principles, including the method of inquiry in which I encourage my students.

The very first thing I do in my general education course on Critical Thinking and the Mass Media is work to demonstrate the media's **POWER OF REPRESENTATION.** As one writer has suggested, "If there were no distinction to be made between representation and reality, if the media really were only 'windows on the world,' then studying the media would make about as much sense as studying panes of glass."

To demonstrate the notion of representation, I use a simple device which students tell me usually does the trick. For those of you who've seen me demonstrate this before, Stifle Yourselves and don't shout out the answer.

> [At this point I show the audience a highly idealized picture of a Native American which appeared on the cover of a travel magazine whose subjet that month was the Southwest. I ask individuals of the audience a simple question: ***WHAT IS THIS?*** Invariably, they respond, "An Indian" or, if politically correct, "A Native American." Only after my continuing to ask the question does it finally occur to someone to say, "A *picture* of an Indian."]

My point is that this is NOT an Indian or Native American; it is a picture of one, and this distinction between a human being and the **representation of one** is profoundly important.

What qualities does this representation imply: Dignity, cultural pride, well being. What qualities are not even hinted at: that Native Americans have the highest rate of alcoholism, TB, unemployment or underemployment, and so on of any significant ethnic group in this country. That is to say, they have the highest rate of despair, which is hardly what the editors of the Travel magazine that published this picture on its cover wanted to convey. Incidentally, you can use any picture for this demonstration; the content is not important. Just be prepared to make a case for what the picture represents and how it might have represented the same content in a different way if editors had a different intent.

In sum, the first lesson that my students learn, I hope, is that media ***Manufacture*** meaning; they do not simply serve as a neutral conveyor belt for information about what happens in the world. The important word here is **manufacture.** In my view, journalism is as much a manufacturing process as, say, the shoe industry. To be sure, there are important political, ethical and even moral differences--but the idea of a manufacturing process in which choices are made about what gets produced and how is precisely the same. Journalists select what will be covered and determine *how* it will be presented, including what elements will be included or left out, what elements will be emphasized or left in the shadows, what language will be used, and so on. These are human choices made by human beings working in a social system in which there are punishments and rewards. Indeed, I encourage my students to use the label ***Representer*** synonymously with the term Reporter.

To get at the concept of representation in the news takes more than just lecturing about it once or twice, or getting students to use the word Representer interchangeably with Reporter. Therefore, I work a lot throughout the semester with the notion of **frame analysis.** In the way I use the term, I am simply referring to the analyzing the **way** in which a news event is represented: what prominence did the event receive? What words or labels were used to describe

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the action and the actors? What sources of authority were cited by the reporter/representer? How much space did the event receive? What questions were left unanswered that are necessary to fully understand the event at hand, and so on.

These are all dimensions that any student can focus on, and most important of all, they keep class discussion away from the endless debate about whether journalists tell the "truth" or not. At least in my experience, people say news is objective when it seems to support their view of the world, and say news is subjective when it does not. Most of my students are in no position to argue truth value questions about, say, our position in the Gulf war. They simply don't have the necessary background information. But they are perfectly well suited to take a news story apart in terms of the language used, sources quoted, and reasonable questions left unanswered.

How do I teach frame analysis? I use a number of means, some more sophisticated than others, but I incorporate them throughout the semester--not just during a unit of study. For instance, I encourage Frame Hunts, by which I mean my students can get extra credit for bringing in a news clipping and successfully convincing their classmates that it contains a frame of some sort. At the beginning of each class session, during my usual question and answer period, I routinely make time available for the results of the ongoing Frame Hunt. The class gets to vote thumbs up or down on each case, and very soon it becomes an interesting and, I think, successful, way of beginning the class session. At the end of the semester, I hold a Frame Off, during which the Frame of the Year is selected from those submitted throughout the semester.

Incidentally, these hunts often yield great teaching materials. Here are two items that students submitted as a result of the Great Frame Hunt. Each won a semester-end Frame Off:

1. PUNK for Peace
2. Halloween illustration---

Yet another device I've used is what I call the Semester Focus project. This one requires much more work on your part as well as the students, but I have found it enormously successful as a way of getting students to incorporate Frame Analysis into their daily intellectual repertoire.

Each semester I pick a social issue and require that beginning with the second week of the term each student begin collecting articles from newspapers or magazines that deal with the assigned topic. These clippings are to be gathered into a log, and each one is to be briefly annotated using the concepts we discuss under the heading of Frame Analysis.

Toward the midpoint of the semester, I form the class into working groups. The first task of each group is to meet and devise a list of five central questions that they think any reasonable person might ask about the semester's given topic. We then discuss these questions in the class as a whole, and out of them arrive at a final list that eliminates duplicate questions. The final list is divided up and each working group is then charged with the responsibility of finding authoritative answers from all sides of the issue; these arguments about the topic are shared with the class. I also collect materials from each working group and put them on file in the monograph section of our library so any member of the class can refer to them at greater length. The more highly motivated students, I found, do make use of these materials to strengthen their annotations.

As the semester nears its close, the working groups meet again to consider the clippings each member has collected. Their task at this point is for each group to identify the one clipping from its pool that most clearly can be argued constitutes a News Frame. The group then must defend its choice before the class. The audience, in turn, gets to challenge the judgment and analysis of each team and the explanations it has offered. The result often is what I call tag-team discourse, a sort of running debate in which students can't help but incorporate concepts talked about all semester if they are to avoid the friendly criticism of their classmates.

In my view, this whole experience has proved valuable because (1) it demands that students engage in frame analysis over a sustained period; (2) it demands that students find out information on social issues about which they may already have formed strong opinions but not on the basis of independent inquiry.

For instance, this past semester, and again this Fall, I assigned the topic of Welfare assistance in California, with emphasis on the Governor's so called Taxpayer's Protection Act that will result in significant impact on many Californians should it pass in November. There is much in the press and on TV about this subject, and will continue to be through the election, and the students have no trouble finding material, pro and con. As well, before long, most of them have little difficulty applying the methods of frame analysis.

I like this particular exercise for a number of reasons. For one, it encourages student-oriented collaborative learning. For another, it makes frame analysis a daily concern. And perhaps most important of all from a critical thinking standpoint, for many of my lower division students, this is the first time they have ever been asked to compare their stereotypical views of a social issue with the available facts--and perhaps reappraise them. One of the things I did when I first made the assignment was ask them to write down their description of a typical AFDC recipient and hand them in. I handed these back at the end of the semester without comment, *after* the students had been through the process of raising and answering their own questions about the nature of welfare. I then asked them to revise their original descriptions based on what they had learned from their research and the research of others, and from work on their media logs.

The changes in viewpoint frequently were dramatic. On one of my evaluations, for example, a student (I presume female) wrote: "The most important thing I learned this semester is that a woman is often only one husband away from AFDC.")

As for the frames students discovered, they were not so much narrowly partisan or pro or con welfare reform as they were entirely consistent with research findings that show clearly that American journalism tends to frame stories about poverty in what is called *episodic* fashion. That is, news stories tend to focus on individual or episodic cases of poverty. Take the family living-in-a-car frame that seems to crop up in local newspapers every holiday. Or what I call the U-Haul Frame, in which a poor family loses everything it owns when its rented U-Haul is stolen.

Perhaps the most highly regarded academic study on the subject has demonstrated that a typical viewer of American network news is nearly twice as likely to encounter news about the particular case of a poor person as compared to news items about poverty as a general issue. Yet as I explain to my students, experimental manipulations of framing showed that how the individual assigns responsibility for poverty VARIES with the particular frames they encountered in evening news. When poverty is portrayed in general or societal frames, viewers tended to attribute responsibility to--and see solutions in--society; but when the dominant frames are episodic, viewers tended to assign responsibility to the poor themselves. This way of looking at frames, as larger ideological constructs, rather than narrowly partisan, is frequently a revelation to my students.

One distinction that you must make clear to students is the one between problems of representation in news stories and problems of logic; they need to be alert to both. By making this distinction, of course, you underscore the need to combine good reasoning skills with media analysis.

For instance, it is perfectly fair for a student to argue that a source quoted in a news story is being illogical, but this is **not** a problem of journalistic representation, it is a problem of the news source's faulty thinking, which the news story is merely conveying. On the other hand, if the reporter/representer fails to point out such illogic or challenge it, it can becomes a problem of representation as well.

These then are the main concepts and methods that I hope to leave with my students , but very quickly here are some others that I've also found useful. One thing I spend time with early in each semester is the *structure* of the media industry. I think it is important for my students to understand that increasingly throughout the 20th century news has become a commodity produced for profit, rather than the stuff of civic debate envisioned by Jefferson and others. In addition to lecturing about the increasingly small number of corporate interests that control American media, for extra credit students may research and present a "family tree" of a major news organization of

their choice. For instance, a student might pick NBC Nightly News, which in turn would lead them to RCA, a corporation that in turn is owned by GE, which is a major defense contractor....and so on. The diagram doesn't have to be elaborate, but it should somehow graphically illustrate the major holdings of the parent corporation.

I also frequently ask students to do a simple content analysis of a major news industry publication, say, *Editor & Publisher*. The student is asked to determine how many articles or items in a randomly selected issue deal with professional news gathering or ethical concerns in journalism, and how many merely deal with technical or profit concerns. Invariably, students discover that while publishers and editors talk in lofty terms about the role of a free press in democracy at public gatherings, their day-to-day concerns are more frequently with how to increase profits.

Because many of my students seem to have limited experience with alternative mass media, I also use a point-of-view exercise in which they are asked to compare the same issue of two magazines of altering points of views. This serves to introduce them to, say, *Mother Jones* and *Commentary* while at the same time requiring them to evaluate the quality of opposing arguments.

These then are some of the ways in which I structure my class on critical thinking and the media, at least where the news is concerned. Essentially, I follow what the British educator Len Masterman has counseled (*Teaching About The Media*, Routledge, 1989). According to Masterman, a successful scheme for media education. ought to include a theoretical framework which can enable teachers and students to make coherent sense of a diverse field; it ought to make plain certain core concepts and principles; and it ought to teach a characteristic mode of inquiry or method of investigation.

The aim of all this, Masterman tells us, and "the acid test of any media education program is the extent to which students become critical in their own use and understanding of the media *when the teacher is not there.* In short, the primary objective is not simply critical awareness and understanding, it is critical autonomy."

Thank you for your kind attention.